

## Honduras defies the world

*Recognise the election winner—and think again about how to defend democracy.*

Nobody could have predicted that tiny Honduras would be the graveyard of both Latin American diplomacy and of Barack Obama's attempt at a friendly fresh start with the neighbours. Yet so it has been.

For five months a de facto government set up by Honduras's congress defied outside pressure to reinstate the president, Manuel Zelaya, after he was bundled out of the country. In an election on November 29th Hondurans voted for a successor. They emphatically chose Porfirio Lobo, of the opposition centre-right National Party.

But was this election credible? The de facto government restricted liberties and curbed broadcasters sympathetic to Mr Zelaya, a Liberal businessman who struck an improbable alliance with Venezuela's far-left president, Hugo Chávez. The ousted president, who has been holed up in the Brazilian embassy in Tegucigalpa for ten weeks, called for a boycott. This, bizarrely, is a crime under Honduran electoral law.

So the election was far from perfect. But despite the boycott calls, the turnout was roughly the same as when Mr Zelaya was narrowly elected ahead of Mr Lobo five years ago. It looks as if most Hondurans saw the poll as a chance to end the power struggle and make a fresh start (see article). The United States and half a dozen Latin American countries will now recognise the result and restore relations. The rest of the region, led by Brazil, says that this would legitimise a coup. Maybe so. But, by denying a way out of the impasse, rejecting Mr Lobo would punish ordinary Hondurans even more.

Nobody comes well out of the Honduran quagmire. It was wrong to oust Mr Zelaya, but he in turn had behaved arbitrarily, defying court orders. In its response to a coup that was a constitutional wrangle, rather than a military putsch, the Organisation of American States was at first absurdly maximalist, calling for Mr Zelaya's "unconditional" reinstatement and refusing talks.

The Obama administration might have settled matters had it acted forcibly from the start, but it was hamstrung by Republicans in Congress, who blocked the appointment of its senior diplomats for Latin America. Mr Obama then reversed course, abandoning Mr Zelaya's cause.

Brazil also did badly. It allowed its embassy to become Mr Zelaya's campaign headquarters, but failed to achieve his reinstatement. So much for Brazil's claim never to intervene in the internal affairs of others. This was different, say Brazilian diplomats, because it was a coup. Yet Brazil has snuggled up to Cuba and Iran, stayed silent when Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega stole a municipal election last year, and kept mum as Mr Chávez has neutered the institutions of Venezuelan democracy.

The divide multilateralism cannot span

Though the recent leftward lurch in Brazil's foreign policy has muddied the issue, Latin America's political divide is not between left and right, it is between democracy and autocracy, represented principally by Mr Chávez and his ally, Cuba. It is this, sometimes blurred, cleavage that makes Mr Obama's laudable multilateralism so hard to execute in the region.

Ideally Honduras's election should have taken place with Mr Zelaya restored. But contrary to Brazil's claim, the biggest threat to Latin American democracy today is—happily—not coups: it is elected presidents who themselves corrode democracy as, to an extent, Mr Zelaya did. Mr

Lobo's election provides one answer to that, but the way it came about was ugly, damaging and ought not to be repeated.

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